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FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000549

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SUBJECT: GODJ LOOKS BACK ON SEVEN YEARS OF ACTION; FIELDS CITIZEN
QUESTIONS

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. During a weeklong, televised "National Seminar of Reflection on Government Action," President Guelleh and the members of his cabinet summarized the GODJ's accomplishments of the past seven years, outlined remaining challenges, and fielded questions from a broad cross-section of the Djiboutian public. Many ordinary Djiboutians tuned in to live coverage of the week's presentations and debates on state-run television and radio. Following what senior GODJ officials characterized as an often "intense" week of discussions, cabinet members digested the collected critiques and suggestions at an offsite retreat in northern Djibouti. President Guelleh and his team are expected to announce resulting revised action plans in the coming weeks, and there are some rumors that personnel shake-ups-if not at the cabinet level, then at the technical level-may ensue. END SUMMARY.

MEDIA OUTREACH TO A LIVE AND AT-HOME AUDIENCE

¶2. (SBU) Djibouti's second "National Seminar of Reflection on Government Action" took place May 2-9. The first such national seminar was held in 2002; this second version examined the GODJ's performance between 2002-2008. President Guelleh presided over the week's events, which featured an invited live audience of Djiboutian citizens. Invitees included participants from all of Djibouti's regions, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations. Audience members could pose questions live, while listeners and viewers could also submit questions remotely. Questions and responses were translated into local languages. In addition to live radio and television coverage, the government-run daily newspaper "La Nation" gave prominent attention to the seminar, which it heralded as an example of "direct, participative democracy" expressed through "constructive reflection and debate." A dedicated GODJ website provided more detailed information on the seminar, and allowed public access to transcripts of the various ministers' speeches, a 200-page seminar "Framework Document," and other materials.

TOPIC TEAMS EXPLORE KEY THEMES

¶3. (SBU) The week's debates were centered around five "theme groups:" 1) Macro-economic stability, growth, and competitiveness; 2) Valuation of human capital, access to basic social services; 3) Rural and urban development, food security, housing, and environment; 4) Promotion of women, social solidarity, social exclusion, and fighting poverty; and 5) Governance, decentralization, internal and external security. Related ministries were clustered together under each topic, and each minister was given the opportunity to present a summary of performance and then to respond to public questions. Questions were wide-ranging, but reportedly largely constructive; President Guelleh occasionally intervened personally as necessary to keep discussions on-topic.

¶4. (SBU) Presentations by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and his Deputy Minister for International Cooperation outlined Djibouti's diplomatic strategy to "reinforce links with traditional partners" and "diversify relations with non-traditional partners." While the Minister and Deputy Minister did not cite the U.S. among top bilateral donors, they noted the re-establishment of USAID, and the USG's "consistent support" for Djibouti's development. In addition, they underlined the important overall impact of the U.S. presence in Djibouti beyond traditional bilateral cooperation programming-including through Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa civil affairs projects.

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MOUNTAIN RETREAT AND NEW MARCHING ORDERS

¶5. (SBU) Following the conclusion of the weeklong seminar, cabinet members regrouped for a three-day retreat at the President's summer residence in the village of Day, located in the relatively remote , mountainous northern district of Tadjourah. State-run media reported that the retreat was dedicated to a close examination of the previous week's discussions, and that this evaluation would inform President Guelleh's "new instructions and directives" to his government. After the return of the ministers to Djibouti City on May 17, Djiboutians continued to speculate about whether the President's directions to the ministries might involve new appointments to cabinet positions or other staff shuffles; MFA contacts have also surmised that there may be some changes in ambassadorial and other diplomatic appointments.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT. While the national seminar unfolded in a relatively controlled environment, questions were often pointed, and the event afforded Djiboutians an important opportunity to address their government directly-and in a format which resonated with Djibouti's nomadic, oral tradition of direct negotiation and debate. President Guelleh's self-evaluation of his government's accomplishments was largely positive, yet he also told citizens that he shared their feelings of "frustration and injustice" about Djibouti's many remaining challenges, and acknowledged that there was still much work to be done to ensure that new economic growth yields real benefits for all regions and social groups. Guelleh also highlighted the timeliness of the national seminar, calling it an "important moment for listening, dialogue, and collective reflection." With the nationwide April celebrations of the President's tenth year in office-and calls for a constitutional amendment allowing him to stand for a third term-fresh in Djiboutians' minds-Guelleh and his government likely recognized an opportune moment to model responsive governance. END COMMENT.
SWAN